



UNIVERSITY OF
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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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Popcorn trees are popping up everywhere

With warmer temperatures and recent rainfall, an invasive plant species is popping up in many Gulf Coast landscapes. The Chinese tallow tree, also known as the popcorn tree, is considered one of the worst invasive plant species in Northwest Florida.

Why are there so many Chinese tallow seedlings this year? Perhaps it's due to the past hurricanes. Chinese tallow trees proved not to be wind resistant and many blew over in the hurricanes. Unfortunately, as we waited for our debris piles to be removed, the seed pods opened and the seeds were spread by birds and water. We've also observed seeds germinating in mulch from chipped trees.

Chinese tallow has been called the "North Florida melaleuca." Like melaleuca, it's a tree that grows and spreads rapidly. It produces massive numbers of seeds and has a high germination percentage allowing this species to invade areas typically occupied by native plant species. It can outcompete most natives and soon displaces them. One of its survival mechanisms is called allelopathy. Chinese tallow is known to possess certain chemicals that either suppresses the growth of neighboring plants or facilitates its own growth.

Chinese tallow was purposely introduced into the United States as early as the 1700's. It comes from China where it has been cultivated for about 1,500 years as a seed-oil crop. It has been sold and used extensively as an ornamental tree and is a common plant on landscaped property.



As early as 1803, Chinese tallow was spontaneously moving into coastal forests. Many early botanists reported on the spread of this tree. Chinese tallow has been recognized as a pest plant in the Carolinas since the 1970's. The Nature Conservancy has now designated Chinese tallow as one of the "ten worst alien plant invaders" in the United States. Other conservation organizations have assigned Chinese tallow the dubious distinction of being one of "100 of the world's worst invasive alien species."

Chinese tallow invades stream banks, riverbanks and wet areas like ditches as well as upland sites. It thrives in both freshwater and saline soils and is both shade and flood tolerant. It spreads by seeds that are dispersed by birds and is increasing found along roadsides. For proof, just take a close look at the number of Chinese tallow trees growing along I-10 between Pensacola and Mobile.

So what can you do to stop the spread of this alien invader? First, learn to recognize the Chinese tallow. Its leaves are very distinctive. They are described as being rhombic or deltoid, with a flat base and a pointed tip—much like an ace of spades. When you remove a leaf, it will ooze a milky sap.

Seedlings should be continually hand pulled before they reach seed-producing age. It's much easier to pull a seedling than to eliminate a much larger tree in a few years.

For homeowners with mature trees, it is recommended that you remove them and treat the stump with a herbicide. If you have only a few trees, use Brush-B-Gon™ or Brush Killer™ herbicide. These diluted herbicide products (8.0% and 8.8% triclopyr amine, respectively) are available from retail nursery supply stores. Property owners with larger stands of trees can use the more concentrated Garlon 3A™ or Garlon 4™ (44.4% triclopyr amine and 61.6% triclopyr ester, respectively), available from farm supply stores. All herbicides are required to be clearly labeled with instructions regarding safe and accurate application of herbicides.

If trees are treated during seed production, plant material should be disposed of in such a way that seeds will not be dispersed to nearby habitats where they may germinate and produce new trees.

And if the removal of this pest tree creates a void in your landscape, replace it with a native tree. Contact your local Extension Office for recommendations or review the information in the UF/IFAS publication on Chinese tallow available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AG148>.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>